

2008 NASCIO Award Submission

Title: Rules and Regulations Tracking and Email Notification System

Category: Government to Government

State: Nebraska

Rules and Regulations Tracking and E-mail Notification System

Executive Summary

The Office of the Secretary of State for the State of Nebraska has simplified the legal process of creating, amending, and repealing regulations and made the process more accessible to the public through the Rules and Regulations Tracking and E-mail Notification System. The system, created through a joint effort by the Secretary of State's office, the Governor's Policy Research Office, and the Attorney General's office, offers a ground-breaking method for citizens to access the information they need all in one place, and for agencies in turn to be able to use the technology to receive public feedback.

The online docket has given the three State offices the further ability to all view the same information, concurrently, in the same place. This saves on administrative time in each office as information related to a regulation's progress only has to be recorded one time, by one office, instead of being tracked and recorded in each office individually. It also has afforded everyone a better understanding of the entire review process, not just the piece of it for which they are responsible.

Other benefits of using an automated system to record the adoption process include drop down menus with fixed information that can save agency administrators time and reduce data entry errors. Since the docket is exportable, reports can be created on current proposed rules and/or from the archive. Ultimately the online docket could eliminate the need for the current paper entries, which would save on personnel time and reduce the need for paper files and storage space.

The e-mail notification feature is also a tool that allows for agency administrators to know in advance what regulations will be arriving for review, and to have a chance to prepare, which helps to move the process along even more efficiently.

Even the State agencies proposing regulations and regulation changes save in operational efficiency by fielding fewer citizen calls requesting information relating to the status of a rule. Where an agency representative before, may have had to spend considerable time researching where the regulation was in the adoption process in order to respond to an inquiry, now that person or the citizen themselves can use the online tracking application as a reliable resource. Information on whether a proposal was accepted or rejected by a particular office is available now in real time.

Project design was initiated in August of 2006 by the Governor's Policy Research Office. All agencies involved committed time and contributed to the concept. The application was launched on January 24, 2007. Usage of the online public docket is high, with nearly 20,000 hits a month. There are currently 50 subscribers to the e-mail notification system.

Description of Business Problem and Solution

Prior to the development of the online tracking system, there was no easy way for citizens to know what new rules were being proposed except for a brief 30 day posting in the local newspaper, or by contacting an agency directly to inquire. Nor, once aware of a new regulation being considered was there an easy method of finding out at what point in the process it was, when hearing dates were scheduled, or how they could have their voices heard on a topic. There was also no easy way for staff of the Secretary of State's office, the Governor's Policy Research Office, and the Attorney General's office to track proposed rules and regulations.

The Proposed Rules and Regulations Docket, created through a joint effort by the Secretary of State's office, the Governor's Policy Research Office, and the Attorney General's office, offers a ground-breaking method for citizens to access the information they need all in one place, and for agencies in turn to be able to use the technology to receive public feedback and to streamline work processes. Prior to the implementation of the system, information related to a regulation's progress was tracked and recorded by staff in all three State offices.

The pioneering concept for this Web service combined a password-protected interface for each agency involved in the adoption process, a password protected archive for proposals no longer on the docket, a public interface with an online comments submission feature, and an e-mail notification registration system, for users to create their own customized docket and track only the regulations they wish.

“Nebraska feels that inter-agency cooperation is of utmost importance when serving the citizen. Our regulations tracking system is a wonderful example of what can come from agencies working together with a common goal of enhancing government accessibility.” Nebraska Secretary of State, John Gale.

Project design was initiated in August of 2006 by the Governor's Policy Research Office. All agencies involved committed time and contributed to the concept. Development was aggressively pursued and completed by the end of the year.

It was necessary for the Secretary of State's office to then populate the docket after all testing was completed, with the current proposed regulations, and for all agencies involved to ensure all dates, and details were accurate before rollout. This process involved a great deal of researching and pulling together of information from different sources to accomplish. All parties pursued this work with dedication, and the application was ready for launch on January 24, 2007.

Usage of the online public docket is high, with nearly 20,000 hits a month. There are currently 50 subscribers to the e-mail notification system.

The Public Docket Web site is available at

<http://www.sos.state.ne.us/rules-and-regs/regtrack/index.cgi>.

E-mail Notification Registration Web site is available at

<http://www.sos.state.ne.us/rules-and-regs/regtrack/notify/index.cgi>.

The main component of the Rules and Regulation Tracking System is a publicly accessible docket that lists all of the current proposals, and the level of their progress through the mandatory adoption process. All parts of the application are Section 508 compliant.

Proposed regulations are organized into an easily readable chart format with minimal scrolling. The docket may be printed in its chart format or downloaded to Excel as a spreadsheet. All proposed rules are kept to one line, alphabetized and separated by agency, and then organized in ascending numerical order by the Title, Chapter(s), and Section(s) which identify the new or amended regulation. This makes searching a particular proposal easy for the user, who can then access a wide array of information from one listing.

The agency promulgating the rule begins the listing, along with a short description, and a field for every step in the regulation process, which is populated by designated agency administrators as the regulation advances. This means that, at a glance, a user can see if a hearing date is coming up, or has passed, and which State agency involved in the approval process currently has the rule for review. If the adoption process has been terminated for any reason, the agency where the termination occurred will also list the reason in its field.

Each listing on the docket also contains a link to a detail screen for agency information, hearing information with corresponding accessibility provisions contact information, and a further link to the full text of the proposed regulation. This detail screen includes, as well, the functionality that allows a user to submit a comment to the proposing agency within the comment period prior to the hearing date. The public hearing notice/comment period can be as little as 30 days. Prior to the creation of the online docket, the only way a citizen could present their feedback to an agency was to send a letter, or physically attend a hearing.

Agency administrators from the office of the Secretary of State, the office of the Attorney General, and the Governor's Policy Research Office access the administrative functions of the docket via a link on the public docket. Their ability to populate information on the docket is defined through their user name and password, therefore the Secretary of State administrator has access to all fields, while the Attorney General administrator only has the ability to enter dates and comments in the "Attorney General's office received" and the "Attorney General's office approved" columns, and the Governor's Policy Research office administrator can only enter dates and comments in the "Governor's Policy Research office received" and the "Date Governor Approved" columns. In this way the integrity of the process is preserved.

Once a regulation has successfully completed the approval process and an effective date has been entered, the listing will be visible for 30 days from that date. After 30 days, the listing is automatically transferred to an archive docket that is accessible by agency administrators only, so no information is lost, but the public docket remains clear of old rules and maintains a streamlined format. If citizens wish to view effective regulations, they may do so via the

Nebraska Administrative Code search application available through the Secretary of State's Web site.

A final, collaborative piece of functionality is the e-mail notification system. The user sets up a personalized docket to track any or all agencies' regulations. When changes are made to any of the agencies' regulations being tracked, or if a new regulation is added to the public docket, the registrant then receives an e-mail notifying them of the change. If the user is being notified of a new proposal, all the demographic information for a hearing is included in the e-mail they receive.

Significance to the Improvement of the Operation of Government

The creation of this cross-agency application has provided for governmental economy through operational time savings in many different areas. The Rules and Regulations tracking system was developed under the self-funded model. There is no projected or actual development cost.

In a process where months, even years can go by before a proposed regulation passes from one stage of the adoption process to the next, following up on every proposal manually could be challenging. Now, the three agency administrators involved in the regulation adoption process have a tool that will accomplish this for them.

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Even the State agencies proposing regulations and regulation changes save in operational efficiency by fielding fewer citizen calls requesting information relating to the status of a rule. Nearly every agency has a set of rules and regulations, and they are constantly being updated and revised. Examples of agencies with many regulation updates are: Department of Health and Human Services, Game and Parks, Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, Liquor

Control Commission, Department of Environmental Quality, Department of Labor, Department of Natural Resources, Public Service Commission, and Department of Roads. These are busy agencies, with a great deal of issues to oversee, and any efficiencies that can be found are important. Where an agency representative before, may have had to spend considerable time researching where the regulation was in the adoption process in order to respond to an inquiry, or processing a written or verbal comment on a proposal, now can rely on the citizen themselves to use the online tracking application as a resource. Information is available now in real time to citizens and businesses, and these users can communicate with their government on a 24 x 7 basis.

Benefit of this Project

This project has benefitted both citizens and staff of the Secretary of State's office, the Governor's Policy Research Office, and the Attorney General's office. Prior to the development of the online tracking system, there was no easy way for citizens to know what new rules were being proposed except for a brief 30 day posting in the local newspaper, or by contacting an agency directly to inquire. Nor, once aware of a new regulation being considered was there an easy method of finding out at what point in the process it was, when hearing dates were scheduled, or how they could have their voices heard on a topic. There was also no easy way for staff of the Secretary of State's office, the Governor's Policy Research Office, and the Attorney General's office to track proposed rules and regulations.

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The Citizens can easily track proposed rules and regulations and can even post comments online. As a user survey respondent put it, "Finally, a legislative web site that is simple to navigate! Excellent work."